

AT THE TOP OF HER LUNGS

Peter Simonson

A Review of *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. By Susan J. Douglas (Random House, 1994)

Old tropes never die—they just get made over to fit into current intellectual paradigms. Susan Douglas' *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* is several things, among them it is a cultural studies take on the modern idea of a divided self. "One of the mass media's most important legacies for female consciousness," she writes, is "the erosion of anything resembling a unified self" (13). This is, of course, a predicament that troubled turn of the century intellectuals like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, W.E.B. DuBois, and William James, among many others. It is also, to take the very long view, one of the central issues for St. Augustine. Like her predecessors, Douglas explores the idea of fractured identities, of never quite being at home in a world of warring, and of contradictory ideals and impulses. Unlike most of her predecessors, though, Douglas is a very funny writer.

There are two main trajectories to this cultural history of popular mass media since the 1950s. On the one hand, it is a critical reading of mass-mediated images of women, or what I might call the identity issue. Here we get the by now standard cultural studies line that popular texts are complex: "We all have our guilty media pleasures, . . . we love and hate the media, at exactly the same time, in no small part because the media, simultaneously, love and hate women" (12). In unpacking the identity issue, Douglas combines autobiographical recollection (a kind of audience sample of one) with textual analysis in order to develop the idea of the fractured. "We remain shattered into so many pieces," she writes, "some of them imprinted by femininity, others by feminism. . . We feel our insides to be in a constant state of roiling suspension, our identities as women are always contingent" (294).

The book's other thread then develops the identity issue in a more collective direction and aims to be a cultural history of American feminism since the 1950s. "The truth is that growing up female with the mass media helped make me a feminist," she writes, "and it helped make millions of other women feminists too" (7). Her argument here goes something like this: As pre-teen and teen girls in the 1950s became a distinct market segment, media were targeted at them. Though many of the mass-mediated images of women were retrograde and limiting, they also cultivated "a highly self-conscious sense of importance, difference, and even rebellion," to the point that "being a spectator [was] an increasingly political and politicizing act" (14, 19).

The combination of a certain kind of group consciousness (which ironically had its origins in the market) along with the right sort of tension (since mass-mediated images were both internally contradictory and, in their more idealized forms, flatly in conflict with social reality), helped make the women's movement possible. As feminism gained steam, it was both helped and hindered by news media (which publicized but also trivialized, marginalized, and sought to divide the movement) and prime-time entertainment programming (which broadcast a domesticated feminism and so contained its force).

This cursory summary doesn't get at the pleasures of the book, which are many. Douglas, who is professor of media and American studies at Hampshire College and media critic for *The Progressive*, is a very witty writer with an easy prose style that makes this book quite accessible for undergraduates. Moreover, though the bulk of her attention is devoted to television, she moves easily to other media, including film, pop music, newspapers and magazines. Among other topics, she discusses Walt Disney and traditional gender roles, loosening sexual mores in early 1960s movies, music ranging from girl groups to the Beatles and the folk revival, TV shows like *Bewitched*, *I Dream of Genie*, and *Charlie's Angels*, news coverage of the women's liberation movement and the fight over the Equal Rights Amendment, and 1980s advertising campaigns for personal care products.

The lineup, consonant with the partly autobiographical nature of the book, represents the cultural trajectory of a baby boomer. Though she tends to find good and bad in all the media, recorded music tends to fare best in her account. "I remain convinced," she writes, pondering the prospects for her young daughter, "that singing certain songs with a group of friends at the top of your lungs sometimes helps you say things, later, at the top of your heart" (304). She is partly reflecting back on her own experience with The Shirelles' "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow," but in so doing she is also revealing the undercurrent of nostalgia that often runs through popular culture studies and that, as Simon Frith has pointed out, is expressed "as a fond look back at adolescence but [suggests] more resonantly the deep desire of intellectuals not to be intellectual."¹ The girl groups of Douglas' own youth "gave voice to all the warring selves inside us struggling, blindly and with a crushing sense of insecurity, to forge something resembling a coherent identity" (87). Just as important, the right kind of music "will do nothing

less than help my daughter survive” (305). Art, here a decidedly popular art, is thus the soothing balm for fractured identities in a complex world. Old tropes never die.

Note

¹Simon Frith, “The Cultural Study of Popular Music,” in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 182.